

# Hermeticism and Cosmic Cycles

by Gauthier Pierozak

## I

*It is as if the whole humanity had forgotten and is trying to remember some kind of a Lost Law.*

Villiers de l'Isle Adam

The study of some metaphysical aspects of the Infinite, and in particular of what pertains to manifestation, defined as the determination of a possibility within the Absolute of the Supreme Principle, allows us to discover some general cosmic laws, that one can particularly analogize to mathematical fractals.<sup>1</sup>

René Guénon clearly mentions this in his work, particularly when he introduces the doctrine of the *cosmic cycles*. He thus states that a given cycle can be

“considered *part of another more extended cycle*<sup>2</sup>; but by virtue of a certain law of correspondence, *each of the secondary cycles reproduces, on a reduced scale, phases comparable to those of the great cycles of which it is a part*. What can be said of the cyclical laws in general will therefore find its application at different degrees: historical cycles, geological cycles, and true cosmic cycles, *with divisions and subdivisions that further multiply these possibilities of application*. Besides, when one goes beyond the limits of the terrestrial world, there can no longer be any question of measuring the duration of a cycle by a number of years understood literally; the numbers then take on a purely symbolic value, and express proportions rather than real durations.”<sup>3</sup>

This is indeed the description of a fractal principle, and is what justifies, if it still required any justification, the use of correspondences and symbols to signify

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<sup>1</sup> Mathematical term, from the Latin *fractus*, meaning “fraction”, designating an object whose structure does not vary whenever its scale is altered. In other words, one can find the same proportionate structure at whatever distance the observer is placed in relation to the subject, ranging from indefinitely close to indefinitely far. See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> We are emphasizing in italics.

<sup>3</sup> René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, Cosmic cycles, Sophia Perennis, 2001, p. 45.

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higher metaphysical concepts that are typically indescribable, because the “lesser” can symbolize the “greater”, according to the law of analogy.

Looking more closely at the “structure” of a cosmic cycle, René Guénon says that

“any cycle can be divided into two phases, which are, chronologically, its successive halves [...] ; but in reality these two phases represent, respectively, the action of two adverse and yet complementary tendencies; and this action can obviously be simultaneous as well as successive.”<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 1: the nautilus is an example of a fractal found in nature.

And he clarifies

“We can [...] divide the whole cycle into two phases, the one descending, proceeding in the direction of ever more accentuated differentiation, the other ascending, returning toward the principal state. These two phases, which the Hindu doctrine compares to those of respiration, are also to be found in the Hermetic doctrine, where they are called ‘coagulation’ and ‘solution’ ”<sup>5</sup>

The very source, or principle, of duality in any cosmic cycle symbolizes the Supreme Principle, which is also the ineffable Infinite or the universal Possibility. The metaphysical Being is the determination of one of the possibilities in the Infinite, and it is the source of our own manifestation. In contrast, what is *not* the Being can be called the Non-Being, i.e. the possibilities that are non-manifestable, or that are manifestable but not determined.

Cosmic cycles therefore symbolize the passage from the non-manifested to the manifested, and the return from the manifested to the indetermination of the non-manifested. We can find these two phases, symbolically, in the correspondence with the circulatory system (new blood leaving the heart, old blood returning to the heart), with respiration (expiration of the breath, inspiration of breath), with digestion (excretion, ingestion), with the ocean tides (flow of water swelling back and forth upon the shore), in all natural rhythms of expansion and contraction, in the alternation between life and death for every species, in the to-and-fro motion of the shuttle upon the loom, in the spider weaving and reabsorbing its web, in the legend of the Phoenix being consumed

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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in flames and reborn from the ashes, in the alternation between awakening and deep sleep, and a myriad of similar examples.

Indeed, everything that is natural in this world is in harmony with the Supreme Principle and as such, regardless of its size or duration, everything follows the laws of cosmic cycles.

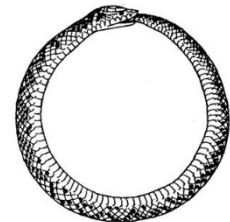
## II

*Every door has two fronts, this way and that,*  
Ovid

The point of passage from one cycle to another reveals itself under two modes: the source of generation corresponds simultaneously to the locus of destruction from a certain perspective. As Guénon says

“all ‘transformation’ appears as a ‘destruction’ when considered from the point of view of manifestation; and what is in reality a return to the principal state seems to be, if seen from without and from the ‘substantial’ side, a ‘return to chaos’, just as from the same point of view the origin, although proceeding directly from the Principle, takes on the appearance of ‘emerging from the chaos’.”<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate this, there is the symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake swallowing its own tail and whose *mouth* is simultaneously a place of destruction and a source of generation. This is because the act of eating/digesting is both destructive and generative depending on one’s perspective. In this case, the snake eats its own tail (destruction) and re-emerges from it (generation) in an endless cycle<sup>7</sup>.



Louis Charbonneau-Lassay thus explains that

“The symbol’s most esoteric meaning comes from a notion cherished by the Ancients that ‘the serpent enjoys an unrivaled longevity; it is rejuvenated by growing old, and reborn in itself at the moment it attains its full growth and

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<sup>6</sup> René Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, The meeting of extremes, Sophia Perennis, 2001, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> See Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *The Bestiary of Christ*, The Ouroboros.

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should begin to decline.’ In fact, as its name indicates that it feeds on its own flesh (*Boros-aura*, ‘it devours its tail’), it is with the substance of itself that the serpent renews itself, according to the old fable, in the measure in which it is depleted by the force of time and events. [...] This capacity of self-restoration made the ouroboros the symbol in the ancient world of the perpetual renewal of life, ‘the eternal beginning again of everything.’”

There is also the figure of the two-faced Roman god *Janus-Bifrons*, whose one face is turned toward the past and the other face toward the future, the present being the point of passage, a point without duration and therefore Janus’ invisible third face.



This place of transformation, or point of passage between the non-manifested and the manifested, can be symbolized by an indefinite amount of figurations. Another example is the geometrical point, manifested but dimensionless, which is the source of all space. From the perspective of the Principle, this is the starting point of the phase of differentiation mentioned by Guénon as cited earlier in this article. This symbolic starting point is also implicit in the name of the first month of the year: *January* is derived from *Janus*, the god of doors and passages. This is the “narrow gate” found at the entry-point of every initiation ritual, from which the profane enters a new state as an initiate. It is the eye of the biblical needle. This is also understood as the pivotal point determining the rebirth of the sun within the year, symbolically known as the winter solstice. This birthing point of the annual sun also signifies the cosmic instant of the birth of Christ; this is the biblical *alpha*<sup>8</sup>. Further, it corresponds to the symbol of the human mouth, which expresses the divine Word and its diffusion in space through sound, and it is also the nose in the middle of the face, which allows the expiration of the divine breath into the world. This point of initiation or initial point is the cavity of the Sacred Heart of Christ, whose access has been opened by the spear of Longinus. Herein lies the significance of baptism, whose water symbolizes the initial chaos from which the new Christian is born.

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<sup>8</sup> « I am the Way » said Christ. According to the perspective one takes, Christ can be the *alpha* from the point of view of the Supreme Principle, and the *omega* from point of view of manifestation, to reuse the explanation from Guénon in note 6.

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We could also add that the symbol of this initiatory passage point is always associated with the color Black, which symbolizes *superior darkness*, one of the apophatic symbols of non-manifestation, as emphasized by Guénon:

“Any change of state can only be accomplished in darkness, the color black in its superior sense being the symbol of the non-manifested; but in its inferior sense this same color also symbolizes the indistinction of pure potentiality or the *materia prima*; and here again these two aspects, although they must in no way be confused, nevertheless correspond analogically and are associated in a certain way, according to one’s point of view.”<sup>9</sup>

### III

*Know first of all that God is too great, too sublime to be known in Himself. But on the other hand He can be known in things... In fact things are veils in relation to God; when they disappear, what is behind them is revealed. He who has revelation sees God in things.*

Ibn Arabi, *Futuha*

Cosmic cycles can be divided into four phases. These phases correspond to the birth of manifestation, the expansion of manifestation until expansion ceases, the contraction of manifestation until contraction ceases, ending with the extinction of manifestation and the reintegration to the non-manifested.

Guénon thus says that

“[the] quarterly division of a cycle is susceptible of multiple applications and it is in fact found in many cycles of a more particular order. One can cite as examples the four seasons of the year, the four weeks of the lunar month, and the four

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

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ages of human life; [...] there is correspondence with a spatial symbolism, in this case principally related to the four cardinal points.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the first phase of the cycle, or the birth of manifestation, corresponds symbolically to the East, to the direction of the sunrise toward which all Christian churches are traditionally oriented. This is the morning in the day, spring in the year, the period when life is reborn, the first quarter of the moon, and it is the *Fiat Lux* of the first day of Creation in *Genesis*. This is the phase of youth in a man.

The second phase in the cycle is the growth period, the expansion of manifestation, symbolized by the sun *reaching* its zenith at noon, in the South. This is the summer; it is the full moon. This is the adult period in a man, the full awakening of which is reached at the end of the phase.

The third phase of the cycle corresponds to the period of decay. This is the phase of contraction of manifestation, the sun setting in the evening in the West. This is autumn when the leaves on the trees dry out and change colors. It is the third quarter of the moon. This is the phase of old age in man.

Finally, the fourth phase of the cycle corresponds to death, characterized by darkness, total silence and the absence of movement. This is winter, the absence of the sun. It is the North direction, the New Moon. Trees have lost all their leaves. This is the decomposition of everything that is dead. This is the *Original Chaos*, the *materia prima*. This is the *black earth* also known as *compost*, it is the First Matter of the alchemists. This is the deep sleep without dream or thought. This is the seventh day of *Genesis*, when God rested after having completed Creation; this final phase symbolizes non-manifestation.

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<sup>10</sup> René Guénon, *Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles*, Some remarks on the doctrine of cosmic cycles, Gallimard, 2003, p. 5.

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### IV

*Indeed, whatever has a beginning and an end is unreal*

Bhagavata Purana

It is from within the heart of the symbolical Original Chaos of non-manifestation that the seed containing the possibilities of manifestation for a new cycle is withdrawn.

René Guénon explains how one should understand the metaphysical symbolism of the seed:

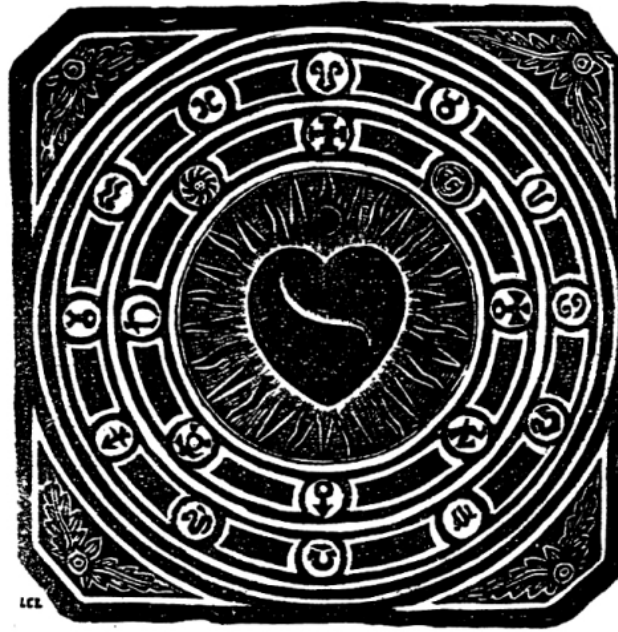
“in the upper world, it is the principle which contains everything; in the lower world, it is the seed which is contained in all things. This is the point of view of transcendence and that of immanence, reconciled in the single synthesis of total harmony. The point is simultaneously principle and seed of the dimension; unity is both principle and seed of numbers; similarly, the Divine Word, depending on whether it is considered as subsisting eternally in itself or as making itself the ‘centre of the world’, is at once Principle and seed of all beings.”<sup>11</sup>

This seed or kernel is therefore symbolized by the geometrical point for space, the numerical unity for numbers; but it is also the egg in the nest, the kernel in the fruit, the seed in the earth, germ containing the potentiality of a plant or a tree in its entirety. This is Noah’s Ark floating on the waters of the Flood that annihilated the world, symbolizing the same virtuality of manifestation as that contained in the mustard seed. It is the thought not yet verbalized. This is Christ in the womb of the black Virgin. It is the Northern star in the night sky, the Centre of the World from which the entire universe has been developed and will be reabsorbed.

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<sup>11</sup> René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, The mustard seed, Quinta Essentia, 1995, p. 300.

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*Marbre astronomique de St. Denis d'Orques.*

### V

*Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Psalm 8.9

We can now apply these cyclical considerations to the analysis of the divine name יהוה by associating each of the four Hebrew letters to a phase within the cosmic cycle (fig. 2).

The principal letter *yod* corresponds to the non-manifestation of the Father (it is placed at the North of the diagram, whose darkness symbolizes non-manifestation). As the *yod* is traditionally considered the source of all the Hebrew letters, it also symbolizes the germ containing the manifestation in its potentiality.

The remaining three letters הוה represent the verb “to be” in Hebrew and thus follow the steps of the birth, the growth and the return to the Principle, with the



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Son as a mediator (who is symbolized by the vertical letter *waw* placed in the South, like the station of the Sun at its zenith, which is identified with Christ).

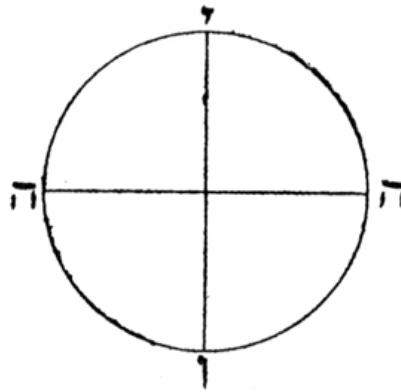


Fig. 2 : Cross-like figuration of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton יהוה.<sup>12</sup>

1. י is the Father, the Principle, the germ, non-manifested
2. ה is the emanation of the Father, the Creation
3. ו is the Son
4. ה is the return to the Father through the Son (“I am the Way”)

The silence follows the pronunciation of the divine name: this is the non-manifested state. In it is the germ, the potentiality, for starting a new cycle<sup>13</sup>.

One could derive a similar conclusion in the case of the sacred monosyllable AUM, about which Guénon indicates that

“it is considered the ideographic symbol of *Âtmâ*, and, in the same way that this syllable has four parts (*mâtras*), whose the fourth one, which is the monosyllable itself considered synthetically in its principal aspect, is ‘non-expressed’ by a character, *Âtmâ* has four conditions (*pâdas*) and the fourth one has no special

<sup>12</sup> René Guénon, *Recueil*, Le symbolisme de la croix, Rose-Cross Books, 2013, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> Mathematically, this can also be represented by the formula  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$  where 10 represent the beginning of a new series of numbers (10 can also be reduced to  $1 + 0 = 1$  which makes it even clearer).

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condition at all, except *Ātmā* considered in Itself, independently of any condition, and which, as such, is not susceptible to any representation.”<sup>14</sup>

One could also emphasize the relationship between the AUM and the Christ as conveyed by Louis Charbonneau-Lassay:

“These letters that in art are found generally interlaced in a monogram and that the misunderstanding of the latter centuries has ended up adopting as an abbreviation for *Ave Maria*, only distinguishing the two letters A and M, have been acknowledged during almost all of the Middle Ages as the equivalent of the acronym *Alpha* and *Omega*, signifying: ‘the Beginning and the End’. This is because if one pronounces AUM the Roman way: *Aoum* – the mouth opens for the first syllable, then immediately closes for the second; and one knows how much, in the East, everything related to the mouth, the lips, the respiratory breath, the human verb, is considered as extremely important from the symbolical perspective associated with metaphysics. Now by applying a text of Isaiah to Jesus-Christ, in the Apocalypse of Saint John it says: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, says the Lord...’; and elsewhere: ‘He who sat on the throne said...: I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.’”<sup>15</sup>



These two examples, among many others, clearly show the metaphysical dimension of some divine names and one can understand indeed why, traditionally, the priests from the Temple of Jerusalem were the only ones allowed to pronounce the name יהוה. This divine name summarizes indeed, in one breath, the integrality of a cosmic cycle: the manifestation of the world, its growth, its decay and its return to the non-manifestation.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, La constitution de l'être humain et son évolution posthume selon le Védanta [The constitution of the human being and his posthumous evolution according to the Vedanta], p. 56, note 3. [Translated for this article]

<sup>15</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *L'ésotérisme de quelques symboles géométriques chrétiens*, Les graffites de Loudun, Ed. Traditionnelles, 1960, p. 27, translated by G.P.